

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 14:22-33

August 7, 2011

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is an old joke related to this morning's Gospel, which you may have heard before. It seems that two pastors and their bishop went fishing together in a small boat. One of the pastors, suddenly realizing that he had left his tackle box in the cabin, stepped out of the boat, and walked on the water over to shore. Just then, the second pastor said he'd forgotten his fishing hat on the front seat of the car. He too stepped out of the boat, and walked on the water over to shore.

When they had both returned, the bishop, who had been watching this remarkable demonstration with his mouth open and eyes wide, reasoned to himself "*My faith is surely as strong as theirs. If they can do it, surely I can.*"

So the bishop stepped out of the boat and immediately he sank in the water. The two pastors grabbed him and hauled him into the boat, but the bishop was determined not to be shown up. He stepped out once more, and again he immediately sank. As the pastors pulled him out again, one of them said to the other, "*Do you suppose we should tell him where the rocks are?*"

Today's Gospel is surely telling us of an actual event in the lives of Jesus and his disciples. But if we only understand it literally, it may seem to have little or no relevance for us. Matthew the Evangelist, surely wants to also convey a symbolic meaning.

The boat represents the Church. The winds and the waves stand for the persecutions and trials which had been let loose on the early Christians. Jesus is no longer with his followers physically; he is in heaven, praying to the Father. However, in their hour of need, Jesus makes his presence felt among them, calming their fears and bringing them peace. Understood in this way, the story surely has *great* relevance for us today.

Some people — including not a few tele-evangelists — seem to think that if you have enough faith, life will be all smooth sailing for you. But this is not so. Faith doesn't shield us from the hard knocks of life and death.

We see this in the case of the great prophet, Elijah in our First Reading. Elijah was undoubtedly a man of faith. But precisely because of his faithfulness, because of his outspoken opposition to idolatry, Queen Jezebel wanted to kill him. So Elijah fled to the desert and took refuge in a cave. A beaten and broken man, he just wanted to die. But, in the cave he experienced the presence of God. And strengthened by that experience, he was able to go on.

We see the same thing in the lives of the early Christians. They too were people of faith. Nevertheless, when they encountered persecution and trials, they thought that the Lord had abandoned them, and their faith began to waver. But,

they discovered that even though the Lord was not with them in the same way as when he walked on earth, he *was yet with them*, and could still help them. And so, their faith revived, and they were able to face their trials and dangers.

The example of St. Peter is especially enlightening. The story of Peter sinking and being saved by Jesus is a symbolic foreshadowing of what was to come. It is a reference to Peter's failure when Jesus was arrested, and of his restoration after the resurrection.

Initially, Peter is full of faith as he sets out across the water. And we remember his brave words at the last supper: "*Lord, I'm ready to die with you if necessary.*" But then came doubt and cowardice, and Peter begins to sink, so that Jesus has to rescue him. St. Peter represents the typical disciple of the present time, caught between faith and doubt.

And it is reassuring for us to see that — at times — the apostles and early Christians were weak and fearful. In other words, they were *just like us*. At the start of an adventure we may be convinced that we are full of faith. But, as we go along, and difficulties arise, we begin to feel that we have very little faith. It is then that we need to turn again to the Lord.

It is a mysterious truth of the Gospel that it's *not* so much when we're strong that we experience the presence of our Lord. No. It's in our *weak* moments — *that's* we experience the strength of God. In Second Corinthians, St. Paul writes that the Lord declares: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (12:9). God's power is made perfect in our weakness. If we never felt ourselves going under, then we'd never know the rescuing power of God.

St. John Chrysostom, the "golden mouthed," the 4th and 5th century bishop of Constantinople, preached these words on today's Gospel:

*[Jesus] has departed.
In midsea he permits a storm to arise.
This was all for [the disciples'] training,
that they might not look for some easy hope of preservation
from any earthly source.
He then allows them to be tossed by the storm all night!
This had the purpose of awakening their stony hearts
in a most complete way.
[Jesus] cast them directly into a situation
in which they would have a greater longing for him
and a continual remembrance of him.*

Faith doesn't save us from trials and tribulations. No. Instead, what faith does, is give us strength and hope to face them. The person who has faith has a source of strength and inspiration — especially when trouble strikes.

And of course the deep truth is that it's *not* really we who keep the faith. It's *the faith that keeps us*.

Today's Gospel shows us the power of faith. It shows the power of the God who gives faith. Today's Gospel shows us what Jesus always does for his people — when the wind is against us and we are in danger of being overwhelmed by the storms of life.

To you whom he has called, to you whom he has given his Spirit: Jesus is not a ghost from the past. He has given you faith. And when that faith falters, he promises to be there to save you even then. When you cry to him, he hears you. And he always responds. Sometimes you may not immediately recognize his response, but he is there. He always hears. He always answers.

And as he reached out and caught Peter, even so he will reach out and catch you.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

