

## **Nineteenth Sunday of the Year August 13, 2017**

1 Kings 19:9.11-13 Romans 9:1-5 Matthew 14:22-33

God's presence is felt more often in tiny, small ways, not in earth-shattering howling wind or rushing fire or storms. He comes to us in gentle little ways and is there present when we need him the most. He expects from us the openness to call on him for help and he will be there to support and guide us. He wants us to be aware of his voice in our life which often goes unnoticed. Our confidence that Jesus is always there presents extending his guiding and supporting hand builds up our faith. In the First Reading from the First Book of Kings we have Prophet Elijah who had gone to a cave at Horeb, the mountain of God, where he stayed for 40 days. Convinced that there is no more to do for God, the Prophet asked God in prayer to take his life. But God has different plans and provides him strength to carry on his mission. In the Second Reading Paul expresses his sadness over the fact that his fellow Jews have not accepted Jesus as Christ and have rejected the Lord. Expressing the great love that he had for his own countrymen, Paul was willing to undergo the worst possible fate, being cut off from Christ, if such could possibly save those that he loved. In the Gospel of today Jesus miraculously saves the frightened disciples. They were caught in the midst of a storm and Jesus comes to them walking on water. Peter while walking on the water towards Jesus began to sink and asks his master to save him. Jesus tells him to place his trust in him.

In the first reading of today Elijah stands at a significant threshold in his career as a prophet. He had been a great prophet. His victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and the execution of four hundred of them, had incurred the wrath of Queen Jezebel. He moves away to Mount Horeb, the Mountain of the Lord and is instructed to await God's passing before him. The prophet sees or hears three natural dramatic phenomena associated with God's presence. First there is the driving wind. This is followed by an earthquake. Finally there is a blazing fire. These signs bring to mind the theophany of Sinai in the book of Exodus. But God is not present in any of these. After this came the most ordinary of events namely, a tiny whispering sound. In this most simple gentle breeze, the prophet discovers God's presence. Elijah covered his face with his cloak, realizing the divine presence and worshiped him. It was on the mountain of God that Moses interceded for the people, pleading with him for his forgiveness and be present among them. Now on the same mountain Elijah does not plead for the people but declares that they have abandoned God and his covenant. As a prophet Elijah had the task of serving people as the mouth piece of God and brings them to the path of righteousness. It was through this tiny whisper of wind that God makes Elijah realize his presence and makes him listen to the divine plans for saving his people. Elijah is now told by God what more he has more to do and receives his commission.

In the second reading of today Paul enumerates the tremendous privileges enjoyed by his fellow Jews. The very name Israelites recalls their famous father who inherited the promises made to Abraham and Isaac. The first of these privileges is the adoption, by which the Israelites are the children of God. The entire Bible is filled with this idea. Next Paul mentions of the glory of God. God's splendor of light appeared when God was with his people in a special way. Paul

also reminds of the covenant through which God established his friendship with his people. He built this bond through Noah, Abraham and Moses and he gave them the Ten Commandments. Hence they are God's children, basking in God's glory, and enjoying the benefits of the covenant and the law. They continue to worship in the Temple. Above all Paul marvels that the Christ is their kinsman. Moreover this kinsman is also their God who is blessed forever. He is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Paul expresses his deep hurt that his fellow Jews as a nation do not recognize Jesus as the Christ, the messiah, promised by God himself through the prophets. This has troubled Paul so much and he says that he would have gladly given up everything, even his life and his Christian faith, to get them to accept Christ as the fulfillment of the promises.

Today's Gospel passage presents us with two miracles, namely, the episode of Jesus walking on the water and coming to the disciples to save them from the storm and calming the storm. This miracle of Jesus follows immediately after feeding the five thousand and more people in the desert that reconfirms the Christological identity of Jesus. Here Jesus manifests his divine identity by calming the stormy waters just as in the beginning God brought order out of Chaos of the raging waters. This story is the continuation of the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and the feeding of thousands of people in the desert. Immediately after the event, we are told that Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go to the opposite shore while he himself would send the crowds away and spend the night in prayer. Certainly there is the implication that the disciples were not too willing to leave the scene. They were enjoying the reflected glory of being part of the miracle worked by Jesus and the enthusiasm of the crowds for Jesus. They were basking in the reputation of being partners with Jesus. But Jesus wants none of this. Having dismissed the crowds and having sent the disciples away, Jesus went up into the hills by himself to pray. In John's version of this story we are told that the people, after being fed by Jesus, actually wanted to make him their king. They, like the disciples, have totally missed the meaning of what had taken place. They could not understand. Therefore he moves away from them to a quiet place. Jesus' work was not to be seen in terms of crowd-pleasing miracles or supernatural powers. It was primarily for him in the quality of his relationships: with God, with people and with himself. His mission gets its significance in a life of service, sharing and community building, in the strengthening of his Kingdom. It does not consist in having power over others, in becoming an idol of the crowds.

The story now switches back to the disciples. They are far out on the lake by now, battling with a heavy sea and fighting a strong headwind. They are there in the lake without Jesus. It is quite clear that here we are seeing a parable of the Church itself, represented by the disciples in their fragile boat surrounded by hostile winds and waves. It was the common experience of the Church during its first centuries as it is in many parts of the world today. It was a difficult situation filled with much fear and anxiety. Matthew gives us the vivid picture of Jesus walking on water towards the boat containing his struggling disciples in the storm. They do not recognize him. They are terrified and quickly conclude that he is a ghost. Jesus responds to their fear by revealing his identity and telling them not to be afraid. He tells them: "Take courage; it is I; do not be afraid." As such, there is no need for fear or anxiety in spite of the apparently threatening dangers around them. Jesus is there to protect us and take care of us

and when we are in difficulty and struggle he will come to our help. We need total trust and faith in him. Peter in fact never really failed, for in moments of his struggle he turned to Christ and held on to him. The wonderful thing about him in that every time he fell, he rose again. It must have been true that every failure of his always brought him closer to Christ. It is said that saint is not the one who does not fail, but is one who gets up every time he fails. Peter's failure made him love Jesus more.

Matthew however, uses this story to teach an additional lesson about faith. To do this he relies on some special material about Peter that none of the other Gospels contain. Here we see Peter as the only person to recognize Jesus but then makes the mistake of wanting to prove it. As a proof he wants to walk on water and he gets the invitation from Jesus to do so. Peter makes the further mistake by taking his eyes off Jesus and looking at the storm. Immediately when fear takes over he begins to sink. Jesus rescues him and reprimands him for doubting and for being a person of little faith. Peter's lack of faith is not connected to his sinking, but his need to walk on the water in the first place. Peter is a mixture of courage and anxiety and here his anxiety dominates. For Matthew and the church, the issue is having the courage to ride the storm out, firmly believing that the Lord is present in the church and will protect it. During the times of trouble believers do not get out of the boat. They remain steadfast, knowing that the Lord will calm the waters. This incident has a good and happy ending as the storm is calmed and the disciples recognize Jesus as the Son of God.

Today's readings tell us that there is never any need for fear and anxiety, for Jesus is always close to us. No matter what may be happening in and around us, his peace is there for us to share. Jesus calls us to reject the ambitions and dreams of the world and separate ourselves from them as the prophet went into the cave or Jesus went into the mountains to pray. We as Christians are called to be not of the world, a counter-witness to its ways, but to be in the world, as taste-giving salt and growth-giving leaven. We have the mission to lead people to that moment when they can recognize the presence of Jesus in us and accept his kingship. One important lesson of today's readings is that, in our turbulent world Jesus is the source of peace. Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper, "Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid." These words were spoken just before Jesus was to be arrested, tried and executed by his enemies. The "world" cannot provide peace in such a situation but Jesus can and does. It is for us to learn how to find the Jesus who gives peace in the ups and downs, in the storms of our own lives. The Gospel tells us is that we must continue to trust in Christ and his loving Father even when God seems to have deserted us. He will calm the storm and restore peace within us. It tells us that we cannot make the mistake like Peter to take away our eyes from Jesus when we enter a storm in our life.

There is something for us to reflect here: Jesus is not in the boat; he is in that hostile environment into which we often fear to enter and instead huddle in the security of our church. It is significant that Jesus is also found outside the boat in the middle of the stormy sea, the world. However, we have to go out there to meet him in spite of the dangers and possible setbacks. Jesus and Peter now step into the boat and the wind drops. There is peace and

apparent calm. The great truth is that, wherever Jesus Christ is, the wildest of storms become calm. In Mark's version of this story, the disciples are simply amazed at the sudden change but do not draw the obvious conclusion. In Matthew's version, however, they understand and believe. They even anticipate Peter's later confession, "Truly, you are the Son of God". The conclusion is that Jesus can also be found in the boat but only when we also are ready to leave the shelter of the boat to find him outside, in which there are problems and hardships. All in all, today's Gospel reflects problems of the early Church, problems which are not unknown to us today. Yet the problems do exist and Jesus is present to free us from them. He will come to us and calm the storm in the church.

Matthew also here features the special role of Peter, the leader of the disciples and something he likes to stress. Peter is close to Jesus and so he is the one who steps out of the boat to go and meet him in the midst of the storm. This surely is an image of the Church's apostolic mission to reach out to find and make Christ present in the world, however hostile it may be. It is not the role of the Church to stay cowering in the shelter of their boat but in the storm of the sea. We become like the young girl crying in the darkened bedroom. Her father came in and put on the light and told her that she would feel better and safer. She replied that it is still dark under the bed and in the closet. We often fear what we do not see. As we come forward to receive our Lord today in the Eucharist, carrying all our problems and concerns, let us remember that is always present waiting for us. He is there stretching out his comforting and saving hand so that we may not sink in our storms of life. He continues to tell us even today, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

There was a little old lady, who every morning. Stepped onto her front porch, raised her arms to the sky, and shouted: "Praise the Lord!" One day an atheist moved into the house next door. He became irritated at the little old lady. Every morning he'd step onto his front porch after her and yell: "There is no Lord!" Time passed with the two of them carrying on this way every day. One morning, in the middle of winter, the little old lady stepped onto her front porch and shouted: "Praise the Lord! Please Lord, I have no food and I am starving, provide for me, oh Lord! The next morning she stepped onto her porch and there were two huge bags of groceries sitting there. "Praise the Lord!" She cried out. "He has provided groceries for me." The atheist neighbour jumped out of the hedges and shouted: "There is no Lord. I bought those groceries." The little old lady threw her arms into the air and shouted: "Praise the Lord! He has provided me with groceries and made the devil pay for them.

"There was once a wise woman traveling in the mountains who found a precious stone in a stream. She took it and placed it in her little bag along with the other personal items. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and she opened her bag to share her food with him. This hungry traveler saw the precious stone in her bag and asked her if she might give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune for having secured an expensive precious stone. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. But soon he discovered that he was unable to sleep for fear that someone may rob the stone. He did not know where to hide it and spend a few sleepless nights. Then he came back to the wise woman after a few days and returned the precious stone to her and

said: 'I've been thinking and I know how valuable the stone is; but I'm giving it back in the hope that you can give me something much more precious. I want you to give me that strength and grace you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone without hesitation.' ""The more you share... The more you grow..."

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