

Do Not be Afraid

a sermon preached on the

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Lection: 1 Kings 19: 9-18; Matthew 14: 22-33

If taken literally this Gospel story has little, or no, relevance for us. However, it seems that Matthew wanted the story to be taken symbolically. The boat represents the Church, and the winds and waves stand for the persecutions that afflicted the early Christians. Jesus is not with them physically. He had already ascended to be with His Father in Heaven. But in their hour of need, He makes His presence felt among them, and in doing so, calmed their fears and brought them peace.

Understood like this, the story does have great relevance for us today.

There are those who think that if we have enough faith life will be plain-sailing. This is not the case. Faith does not shield us from the hard knocks and problems of life. What is true is that in our times of need and despair if we have enough faith to reach out to God in prayer, God will be a presence to us, to comfort and encourage us to face our difficulties.

We see this in the case of the Prophet Elijah in our reading from the Book of Kings this morning. Elijah was undoubtedly a man of faith, but because of his opposition to idolatry, Queen Jezebel wanted to kill him. So he fled to the desert and took refuge in a cave. A beaten and broken man, he just wanted to die. However, in the cave he experienced the presence of God, and encouraged and strengthened by that experience, Elijah was able to move on.

We know from experience that on our own we find it very difficult to withstand the storms, fears, and sinking experiences of life. But, as Christians, we have learned, through faith, to reach out in prayer to God, and we know that God's hand sustains us, God's words give us courage, and God's presence gives us peace.

Fear is one of the great blockages in life. It is one of the clouds which can block off the sunlight of God's love. When we no longer feel God's light and warmth, our strength is frozen and our ability to deal with life may become paralysed.

On a worldwide scale, psychologists discern a sort of blanket depression lying over people. There is an ominous sense of threat. It is as if we have invented a monster threatening to destroy the world. The factors of change appear to be beyond our control, and the very foundations of civilization are creaking. People feel menaced and helpless.

Families are under stress as the values and codes which traditionally guided life are questioned or disregarded. Parents are fearful about how their children will turn out. Young people have to cope with the anxiety about employment opportunities. Pressures are put on young people by their peers with regard to drugs, sexual prowess and the materialistic standards they are expected to reach. All of these factors combine together in a depressing burden which many are finding too heavy to bear. Yet, through the darkness comes the voice of God. "IT IS I – DO NOT BE AFRAID".

It is an interesting fact that the most frequently repeated phrase in the Bible is : "Do not be afraid". Someone has counted more than 360 instances of that message. It is as if God wants us to hear it every day of the year. "DO NOT BE AFRAID".

Peter emerges as our model, not because of any greatness on his own part, but because of what he became by the power of God. He had already left everything to follow Christ, but he still had much to learn about himself and the cost of being a disciple.

The story tells us that when Jesus came to them in the storm, Peter ventured overboard in blind abandon – he then began to doubt and began to sink. However, he did have enough faith to cry out “Lord, save me.” It was here, in the moment of weakness, that he found a strong hand. He found a power to sustain him. In the moment of paralysing fear, he found a source of courage.

It doesn't really matter whether we take this story literally or not. The important thing is that, in the disciples' time of need, Jesus came to them.

Olive Wynon, in her book “Consider Him”, quotes from the letters of St Francis de Sales, who had noticed a custom in the country district in which he lived. He had often noticed a farm servant drawing water from a well. He also noticed that before lifting the brimming pail of water, the girl always put a piece of wood into it. One day he asked – “Why do you do that?” She looked surprised and answered as if it were a matter of course – “To keep the water from spilling – to keep it steady”.

Writing to a friend St Francis told this story, and added : “So when your heart is distressed and agitated, put the cross into its centre to keep it steady”.

In every time of storm and stress, the presence of Jesus and the love which flows from the Cross, bring peace, serenity and calm.

Amen.

References: Matthew 14: 22-33
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