

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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Received August 3rd, 2020

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 14:22–33. It is the story of Jesus walking on the water toward the disciples in the boat and of Peter’s faltering faith that causes him to sink into the stormy waves. This passage has much to teach us about discipleship and correct faith.

It is an interesting detail when Matthew tells us that Jesus forced the disciples to get in the boat and go without Him to the other side. This is the first time the disciples are sent without Jesus accompanying them. Note, too, that we are told Jesus was alone and by Himself on the land while the disciples were far from land. All these details emphasize the separation from Jesus being felt by the disciples. Then things get worse, as if mere separation isn’t bad enough! In the midst of their aloneness, we are told that they are harassed (literally “tortured”) by the sea and fighting contrary winds. These terms are very specific and refer to the situation the early Church faced when it was tortured and persecuted by pagan Rome as well as the struggles early Christians faced when they fought against the contrary forces of pagan culture. These details, and their relationship to the situation of the early Church, tell us that this is no ordinary storm. The fact that they are in a boat is symbolic as well since the boat was an early symbol for the Church itself. Today we still refer to the central part of a traditional church building as the “nave”, a Latin word that means “boat”. Then things still become worse! They come to the fourth watch of the night, which is the darkest hour of the entire night. It is then, in the darkest hour, at the most difficult time of struggle when they feel utterly alone and distanced from the Lord that Jesus comes to them. He has not abandoned them after all. He is with them just as was promised in Matthew 1:23 when He was announced as Emmanuel, a name that means “God with us”. The situation of the disciples was no accident or error of judgment. Remember, Jesus forced them into it. Sometimes the trials we face teach us a lot about ourselves and God. Sometimes we only discover our potential when we have to utilize every resource for our survival. Sometimes it is in the midst of our darkest night and greatest feelings of abandonment that we realize God has been with us all along. The storms we face are both communal and personal. Sometimes we can actually blame God when we feel a sense of isolation and separation from the Lord’s presence. Sometimes, too, we can feel like God has forced us into a situation where we are vulnerable and at risk. All these elements are present in this Gospel passage and should give us profound cause for reflection without dismissing such questions with superficial answers. Indeed, we cannot understand the meaning of this passage until we understand how these elements have taken place in our own lives as well.

What do you think is the good Jesus intended when He forced the disciples to get in the boat and face this situation while He remained on the land?

When have you felt most separated from Jesus in your life?

How are Christians tortured and harassed today?

What are the contrary winds of our culture that fight against the values of the Gospel?

How can the Church give people strength and encouragement in the midst of the storms we face?

What has been the “darkest hour” in the Church’s history?

What has been the “darkest hour” in your life? Where was the Lord in the midst of it?

How has Jesus come to you and given you strength when you least expected it? The disciples must have wondered why Jesus let them go through such a trial. For what painful trial or vulnerable situation in your life are you searching for a divine answer?

It’s interesting that the disciples cooperated with Jesus’ command and actually got into the boat without Him; so often in our lives we refuse to follow when the Lord leads us into vulnerability.

What risk of faith is the Lord asking you to take in your life now?

The second significant element of this passage is in the experience of Peter. Peter first expresses his doubt when he hears Jesus announce Himself by stating “I Am”, which is the revealed divine name of God in Exodus 3:14. Peter responds to our Lord’s revelation with an element of doubt when he said, “Lord, if it is you...” Peter doubted that Jesus could be present to him in such a troubling moment of life and expresses his doubt by using an expression similar to that employed by Satan when tempting the Lord in the desert (“if you are...” Mt 4:3). Peter’s statement, then, is an effort to make the Lord prove Himself. Peter believed that God’s presence should be manifested by a calm environment when our lives are peaceful and we are happy, secure, and carefree. Peter did not think that God’s presence would be manifested in the midst of being tossed about, tortured, and our lives placed at risk. Peter doubted that the voice of Jesus could really be speaking to him in the midst of that boat caught in the storm. Peter then asks to walk on the waters like Jesus is doing. This is Peter’s second doubt. He wants to do something that only God can do (walk on the waters). To “walk on the waters” was a symbol of triumph and a demonstration that one could overcome the forces of chaos. Rather than endure faithfully the storm he is facing, Peter reveals his desire to walk on the waters and show that he can conquer them and be unaffected by them. In response to Peter’s doubtful question, Jesus says, “Come.” This is not so much an invitation as it is a challenge. You see, Peter wanted to be “like God” and walk on the waters that were threatening him. Jesus wants Peter to realize his dependence on God rather than trying to be like God, and so Jesus invites Peter into a vulnerable state so he can know his need for a Savior and stop trying to be like God. It was not that Peter took his eyes off Jesus that caused him to sink but that he wanted proof of the presence of Christ and that’s why he left the boat in the first place. Jesus calls this “little faith”. Sometimes we can be like Peter and ask God to prove Himself because we doubt His presence in the midst of our life struggles as well. Sometimes we can think that we should be able to overcome all our life challenges and problems in spectacular ways as a witness of our discipleship. The reality is that our lives are filled with weakness, tragedy, and uncontrollable circumstances that sometimes make us feel like we are sinking. That’s not a sign of our lack of faith, or of God’s absence, but can be the motivation for us to call out to God as our Savior. Remember, Jesus can’t be our Savior if we don’t acknowledge our need for a Savior. Peter had to be brought to a desperate state before he called out to the Lord to be his Savior, and sometimes so do we.

When have you asked God for an opportunity that turned out to be a situation of distress rather than blessing (like Peter walking on the water)?

When do you find yourself asking God for proof of His presence in your life or doubting God’s presence in the midst of challenges?

In what ways can we fall into the temptation to believe that being a disciple means we should be able to “walk on water” and be preserved from the challenges and weaknesses of human life?

How has Jesus led you to need Him as your Savior?

With what moment of Peter’s experience do you most identify?

How do you think Peter’s attitude towards Jesus changed because of this experience?

The Good News of this passage is that God will save us even when we have “little faith” if we call out for Him. No matter what mess we are in, Jesus wants to be our Savior. What keeps people from calling out for the Lord’s saving grace in their lives?

It is significant that the Gospel tells us Jesus took time to pray while the disciples were in the boat. This is the first time in Matthew’s Gospel that we read about Jesus praying. While we do not know the content of our Lord’s prayer at this moment, it is apparent that His prayer prepares Him for what is about to take place. As we saw in the preceding reflections, Jesus is preparing to reveal Himself as the presence of God to the disciples. The Lord’s prayer prepares Him for this revelation by establishing communion with the Father. The disciples were not at prayer, and so their absence of communion left them frightened, feeling alone, and doubting our Lord’s revelation. The prayer of Jesus was not a brief experience. Rather, it was an extensive time that lasted all night until the fourth watch in the morning (between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m.).

As the disciples are entering more deeply into fear, Jesus is entering more deeply into communion with the Father and clarity of His identity as the great I AM. This insight into the effect of prayer should inspire and motivate us as disciples to seek prolonged communion with God, especially when we feel distanced and facing the storms of life. Our Lord's prayer lasted for hours and that, too, is instructive for us that we should not expect immediate results for our efforts. Prayer is not so much about giving God our grocery list of needs as it is about being drawn into the Divine Presence and being conformed to the Divine Will. Ultimately, the only time we are told the content of Jesus' prayer is when He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:39–42). Our Lord makes it clear that prayer is not about convincing God to do our will but about motivating us to do the Father's will.

How differently do you think Peter would have responded to the situation of the storm and darkness had he spent the time in prayer like Jesus did?

Who is experiencing storms in their life now, and how can you assist them with your prayer?

Jesus prepared for His moment of profound self-revelation by immersing Himself in prayer.

Before what moments do you pray most intensely?

Why do you pray? What is the difference between prayers and prayer?

How can you deepen your prayer life and learn to pray in new and more profound ways?

The final part of this passage is the experience of the disciples paying homage to Jesus. Despite the reality of their little faith, the experience of the storm and our Lord's revelation has actually deepened their awareness. They have come to know Jesus in a new way because of His revelation in the midst of the storm and walking on the waters. Jesus is with them once again, and together they reach their destination in safety. The experience of finding God in the midst of adverse conditions and difficult situations is meant to change us as well. We are called to be people of deeper faith in Jesus who trust His presence regardless of our experience and who do not insist that His presence be manifested through a life of calm and smooth sailing. The great saints understood that the presence of God in their lives was not intended to preserve them from challenges but to accompany them in the midst of difficulties. A spiritual father of the fourth century wrote, "Do not pray for the fulfillment of your wishes, for they may not accord with the will of God. But pray as you have been taught, saying: Thy will be done in me (cf. Lk 22:42). Always entreat Him in this way — that His will be done. For He desires what is good and profitable for you, whereas you do not always ask for this." ^[1]

Who is someone you know who has grown deeper in faith because of a trial they have experienced?

What are the significant experiences of your life that have helped you grow deeper in faith?

What have you come to know about Jesus because of the trials you have experienced?

How does it change your prayer to call Jesus your Savior after having passed through some of life's storms?

The disciples gave homage to Jesus, which means that they submitted their lives to Him through the action of kneeling. How do you give homage to Jesus in your life?

The voice of Satan tempted Jesus in desert with the words "If you are the Son of God..." Peter tempted Jesus on the sea with similar words when he said, "If it is you..." With what language do you find Satan trying to tempt you by questioning the presence or action of God in your life?

^[1] Evagrius, "Prayer" in *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, originally compiled by Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and Makarios of Corinth, Ed. by G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware, London: Faber and Faber, 1979.