

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Roused by an angel, Elijah got up, ate and drank his fill, and set out. Nourished by that meal, he walked forty days and forty nights, all the way to the mountain of God, to Horeb. When he got there, he crawled into a cave and went to sleep...A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks, but God wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but God wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.



1 Kings 19, 9, 11-13

After sending the people away, he went up a hill by himself to pray. When evening came, Jesus was there alone... "Take heart, it is I; don't be afraid...O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Matthew 14, 22-33

Sadly, there are people who see the hand of God behind natural disasters, catastrophes, accidents and terrorist acts. Often, the more catastrophic the experience, the more inclined they are to see it as arranged by God. Having made us and our world free, God does not intervene to reverse the laws of physics or to interfere with our ability to make bad choices and decisions. God is not the designer of the disasters that befall our world. Elijah's experience is a reminder that God is more likely to be found in the gentle breeze.

Today's first reading from *Kings* gives us a graphic description of the prophet Elijah's encounter with God. The verses that precede our reading depict Elijah at the end of his tether. He is so depressed that he sits down under a broom tree and begins to think that he would be better off dead. With these thoughts he falls asleep and awakes to discover a hearth cake and a jug of water beside him, and an angel urging him to take some nourishment as preparation for a long journey. Our first reading picks up the story, telling us how long he journeyed and what happened at the end of that journey. He discovered that God was not in the spectacular or the cataclysmic, but in the soft whisper of a gentle breeze. Why then do we imagine that moments of insight and revelation will be accompanied by the dramatic and spectacular? Perhaps it's because we can read today's gospel as though it's encouraging such expectations. It describes a spooky sort of encounter between Jesus and his disciples on the storm-tossed lake. Maybe the disciples thought that Jesus was trying to tell them something with the storm. But whatever the facts of his walking on the water were, Jesus was less interested in what threatening messages might be written into the crashing of the waves than were his disciples. His focus was on personal trust and confidence and inner resources for life. Perhaps his prayer on the mountain made him realize that God sets us fairly prosaic challenges like these, and without the Cecil B DeMille histrionics.

The barque of Peter has long been used as a symbol of the Church. We all know from bitter experience how the Church has been buffeted by the waves of scandal emanating from sexual abuse and failure by church leaders to deal openly and honestly with it. Likewise, we are aware of criticisms that the Church has lost touch with young people or no longer speaks to the lives of ordinary people or has distanced itself from the poor and needy. The sharp decline in Mass attendance in the western world is an indication that many have walked away. Yet the Gospel of Jesus lives on and still disturbs those of us who might be inclined to opt for comfort.

Many people have also been buffeted and battered from without. The greed of corporates, the global financial crisis, the collapse of superannuation funds, terrorism against Christian communities in places like Iraq, Egypt and Pakistan, calls by governments for restrictions on religious freedom and the persecution and murder of community leaders who have dared to protest against the injustice of despots have brought upset, grief and terror to the lives of many.

Yet Jesus still extends to everyone the same gentle but insistent call and outstretched hand that he extended to Peter in the storm: "Come!" Do we dare accept his invitation? Or do we invent excuses and look for ways of avoiding it? Like Peter, we often hesitate, overcome by doubt or fear.

We all know, only too well, the fears that hold us back or cripple us. We're afraid of what the doctor might tell us when we go to get the results of a medical test; parents are afraid that their children will be seduced by the drug culture or by alcohol or by pornography; teenagers are afraid of being rejected by their peers or being victimized by cyber-bullying; family wage-earners are afraid of being made redundant in the work-place; the middle-aged fear the onset of a mid-life crisis or the possibility of a broken marriage; the elderly among us are afraid of being parked in nursing homes or of losing their mobility or their independence. And most of us are afraid of death.

When it comes to our relationship with Jesus, we are indeed just like Peter. We are attracted by his invitation: "Come!" but we balk in fear because he might ask too much of us. Today's gospel makes it clear that Peter was lacking in faith. Was it lack of faith in Jesus or lack of faith in himself? Perhaps both? Maybe we ourselves argue: "I'm just an ordinary person with no distinguished pedigree or proper qualifications. I'm no leader and I don't fight for justice or participate in protests." We can use false humility to avoid the demands of the Gospel, to tell God to go and bother someone else or to dodge God's call to holiness and living with integrity.

However, despite our reluctance and timidity, we would do well to take note of the hope which Jesus holds out to us all at the climax of today's gospel reading. Stretching out his hand to Peter (and to us) Jesus encourages: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." No matter how much we are threatened and battered by the storms of life, Jesus is always there for us, inviting us with outstretched hand to come and join him. Not only does he invite us to come to him with our fears and doubts and inadequacies, he challenges us to

imitate him by reaching out to others in need with words of encouragement and hands of compassion.