

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
AUGUST 13, 2023
NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

SCRIPTURES:

1st Kings 19:9-13 God grants strength to Elijah in the silence of prayer.
Romans 9:1-5 Paul suffers with the fact that Israel does not believe.
Matthew 14:22-33 Jesus holds Peter when Peter falters in the storm.

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Matthew:

Matthew wants to teach his community of Jewish believers in Jesus that their salvation depends on their profound attachment to the Lord Jesus Christ. He will be their shelter and their security in the midst of the world's troubles and turmoil. The leaders of this Christian-Jewish community for whom Matthew is writing must hear how the original leaders of the followers of Jesus were confirmed in their faith by Jesus himself. They must remember the role played by Peter in the leadership of that first generation now past.

Over the next few sections, Jesus will deal with Peter as the representative of the other leaders, the other apostles. Through Chapter 17, there are three parts, each ending with a story involving Peter and his relationship with Jesus (13:54-14:33: Peter walking on water; 14:34-16:20: Peter's confession of faith; 16:21-17:27: Peter paying the Temple tax).

In that particular storm, that particular night, Jesus comes over the waters (already a sign of divine power as in Genesis) and says: "It is I," those sacred words that identify God when Moses asks for God's name. These Jewish disciples could not fail to get the message that Jesus was identifying himself with the God of Mount Sinai. The Christian-Jewish community for whom Matthew wrote surely heard the same overtones.

Notice the parallels between this event and the resurrection appearances of Jesus: Fear on the part of the disciples; they do not recognize Jesus; they think he might be a ghost; then, they are reassured by him. He comes to them to strengthen them in faith. When they remembered this story, they had already experienced the risen Christ, so they were able to connect this event with the resurrection of the Lord.

Peter would need to keep his attention firmly focused on the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who has all power in heaven and on earth. If he were ever to shift his attention from Christ to himself, he would literally sink! Peter will falter during the trial of Jesus because, again, he is afraid. He has to keep in mind that scene on the lakeshore after Jesus' resurrection: "Peter, do you love me?"

Walking on water with Jesus is a sign of Peter's sharing in the awesome powers which the Lord will give him for the guidance of the Church community. It is not given to him for his own aggrandizement or for the sake of amazing his audience. He must know that the hostile forces of nature will have no ultimate victory over him in his task as representative of the Lord Jesus. He will be able to overcome the most ferocious opposition in his ministry of confirming his brothers and sisters in their faith.

We too easily forget that for the Jews, the sea is the place where monsters dwell! They had been a people of the desert, not a seafaring nation. Their experience of the sea, even of Lake Galilee, is one of threat and of danger. It had come to represent much of what was hostile in their lives. Fear of the unknown caused them to exaggerate the reality of the sea's dangers. The Christian community

today has its own dangers and threats. With Peter, we need to keep our eyes firmly fixed on the Lord Jesus.

Kings:

Elijah's prophetic ministry was exercised in the Northern Kingdom around 850 BCE. There is no "Book of Elijah" in the Jewish Scriptures, but his work is reported in the Books of Kings. He is a kind of Moses figure for his times: He runs into problems with the monarchy as Moses did in Egypt; He escapes into the desert only to be summoned from there to minister to God's people. He, too, needs to undergo a personal conversion. Whereas he had expected God in the mighty upheavals of the natural order, he discovers that God ultimately can be found only in profound silence, when the self is completely out of the way. He has to put aside all his human and earthly expectations in order for the utterly transcendent God to come to him and to strengthen him in his powerlessness.

Romans:

Paul begins the three-chapter section where he will deal with the case of Israel which has been God's chosen but has now rejected God's Messiah. Where do the People of the Promise and of the Covenant and of the Glory of God now stand before God? They have not been faithful. Is God still faithful? Paul is in anguish. He goes so far as to say that he wishes he were alienated from Christ if his flesh-and-blood Israelites would only come to believe!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What situations do you find most threatening to you at this time in your life? What do you fear the most? Do you firmly believe that Jesus calls you to come to him no matter what the danger may be? Do you feel that you have been confirmed in your faith by Jesus himself who has invited you to come to him?

2. What are the dangers that most threaten Church leaders today? What are the *storms* that they have to face every day? A hostile culture that does not value religious principles or religious commitment? An atmosphere which favors death rather than life (abortion-on-demand, death penalty, neglect of the poor, etc.)? Superficial faith in the lives of many Church members? A shortage of vocations to the priesthood and religious life?

3. What dangers does your particular community face? Your parish, your prayer group, your family? Do you see Jesus coming toward your boat that is being tossed to and fro on the waves? Do you hear his reassuring voice, "Do not be afraid! It is I!" Do you and your fellow Christians want to walk toward him over the very real dangers?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Ask the members of your group or family whether they will support you as you face the dangers that are all around you. Make a commitment to be firmly present and caring whenever anyone is threatened.

PRAYER

"Lord, save me!"

CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

Leaders in the Church must have a very special relationship with Jesus Christ. In the Gospel according to Matthew, which is particularly addressed to the leaders of the Christian-Jewish assembly (Church), Peter represents all the apostles, indeed all the leaders among those who believe in Jesus. Matthew arranges his material to show that Peter was prepared by Jesus in a very special way for his role in the early community. All Church leaders after Peter look to this Gospel for an outline of Christ's teaching concerning leadership.

While we acknowledge that the Bishop of Rome, as successor of Peter in the See of Rome, holds a unique relationship with the Lord Jesus, we must not focus all our attention on the pope as the only divinely appointed leader in the Church. Bishops, pastors, non-ordained pastoral ministers, parents, and other servants of the Christian community need to see themselves addressed when Matthew tells stories involving Peter. The model that is offered in the person of Peter in this Gospel has to be extended and applied, with certain adaptations, to all who are called to serve the Church.

We have been tempted to avoid responsibility for Church leadership by looking above to the next one up on the hierarchical ladder. Bishops appear to have their hands tied by the policies of the pope who happens to be in office at the time. Pastors abdicate responsibility for pastoral initiatives because the diocesan bishop has not yet given the signal that such initiatives are approved. Lay leaders say they cannot do anything in their parishes because their pastors are against everything they propose. Surely, institutional control cannot contain all inspiration and guidance in the Church community.

The common good requires that leaders have the authority to decide what measures should be taken when the unity of the Church is being threatened. Unity of faith and unity of doctrine are essential to the Church's continuing faithfulness to the Lord. A system of governance for the whole Church and for the local churches has been developed, according to historical circumstances, for the assurance of that faithfulness. That system is in constant evolution; it adapts to changing conditions in order to assure that its purposes be effectively fulfilled. The juridical order in the Church serves the ideals of the faith and of the communion of all the faithful. Your local pastor is not God, neither is the bishop, neither is the pope.

As a former parish priest, I need to re-read the Gospel of Matthew. I need to see again what Matthew, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wanted Church leaders to hear in that period just after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple when the 'whole world had changed.' What was expected of leaders then? What is expected of leaders today?

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