

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(1Kings 19:9a.11-13a / Matthew 14:22-33)
13.08.2017

We can walk on the heavy sea!

The episode of Jesus walking on the sea is very well-known. What is its meaning? Is Jesus just showing off his divine origin? Is it just an opportunity for Jesus to highlight that Peter has little faith?

In order to understand the meaning of our Gospel reading, it is important to remember that Jews considered the sea as the dwelling place of obscure and dangerous forces. In Isaiah the historical experience of the exodus, in which the Lord dried up the Red Sea to make a way for his people, becomes a divine victory over the dragon of the great abyss (51:9-10). Likewise, the roaring of the pagan nations in revolt against God is likened to the roar of the sea (Is 5:30). And in the book of Revelation, we are assured that, in the new creation, there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and that the sea will be no more (21:1).

It is clear that the miracle of Jesus walking on the sea is a sign of his mastery over all that is dark and frightening in our hearts and in the world, all that threatens our sense of belonging and security.

Obviously when Jesus says: "Do not be afraid", he does not mean: "Do not feel fear". To be human is to feel fear, only stones are not afraid. The problem is to deal with the feeling of fear in a proper way, the challenge is not to allow the feeling to become the motivation of our decisions, the driving force of our lives. And here we can say that Peter sank not because he was afraid but because he allowed his fear to distract him and to prevent him from keeping his eyes and heart focused on the Lord and his strength.

However the fact that Peter took fright should not obscure and important point: Jesus gave him the power to walk on the sea. In his generosity the Lord shared with a human being his authority over the dark forces of evil. This fact is there to remind us that we do not believe in a God who keeps us in a kind of infantile dependency, leaving us unequipped for life and expecting us to beg over and over again for help and protection.

In our Gospel reading, we could dare to say that the greatest miracle, the amazing good news for you and me, is not so much that Jesus walked on the sea but that one of us was made able to do it.

Today each one of us who is baptised has received the same gift as Peter did. Through faith, when we keep our eyes fixed on the Lord, like Peter we can walk on the heavy seas of our lives.

We all know what it is to go through stormy seasons. It is clear that faith in Jesus Christ does not prevent us from being hurt, wounded, rejected, misunderstood, lonely, from experiencing physical and emotional pain, from taking fright when the wind is strong and persistent.

Jesus says: "Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid". The Greek word for "courage" is related to confidence, trust, and perseverance. The courage we are supposed to display in every human circumstance is not to be found in our own strength or abilities but in our communion with the Lord, in the fact that we are with him.

It is precisely here that lies the crux of the matter: when we are in the midst of a crisis, our pride and our inner demons will always whisper in our hearts that we can deal with it on our own, that we cannot trust anybody, that we do not need to speak about it with somebody

else, that we can face the storm alone. Then because we rely on ourselves things become worse and we sink.

In Christ, and in communion with our brothers and sisters in faith, we can walk on the sea. The Lord empowers us and gives us the strength to get up and walk when we have fallen, to persevere on the journey when we are lost and downcast.

At the end of the Gospel of St Mark, we find the same idea as that of walking on the sea: the Lord promises us that we will be able to pick up serpents in our hands (16:18). The serpent here is a symbol of all that tempts us and makes us trip up. Again if we cling to Christ, we are made able to face our daily temptations. When we forget him, when we do not keep our eyes fixed on him, when our hearts and minds are unfocused, we are beaten by the serpents and we sink in the sea.

In our Christian communities, one of the important ministries we should exercise is to help one another to live from the empowerment we have received from God. With our physical and moral weaknesses and limitations, with our wounds and our sin, we are not supposed to remain fearfully paralysed and passive. The Lord calls us “Come and walk on the sea, come and realise how much you can do for your own good and the good of the world.”

Our Gospel reading is not just about Peter’s weakness and Jesus’ greatness, it is also a promise of our participation in Jesus’ greatness. A promise which is fulfilled at Pentecost when the Spirit comes upon us, a Spirit of power and of love (cf. 1Tm 1:7).

Let us not afraid to live up to our calling, to the power that is within us.