

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
1Kings 19:9a.11-13a / Matthew 14:22-33
09.08.2026
Image of God

Today our 2 readings tackle a very important subject: who is our God? What is the God we speak about, bear witness to and worship? When people listen to us and look at us, what image of God do they discern?

There are 2 aspects of Elijah's experience which seem particularly relevant to our subject: first, the God of Elijah reveals himself in the "sound of a gentle breeze." For the Jews of Elijah's time, this experience must have been mind-blowing. All gods were expected to manifest their presence in the mighty wind, in fire or in earthquakes. Yet the God of Israel reveals himself, as we read in another biblical translation, "in a sound of sheer silence." (NRSV) The Hebrew expression is difficult to translate but it is clear that it aims at describing a God who reveals who he is in smallness and discretion, not by imposing strength.

This truth about God reaches its most perfect fulfilment in the Incarnation. In Christ's birth in a manger and his death on a Cross, God reveals who he truly is: a Father who is on the side of the poor, the vulnerable, the humble, those who are considered to be insignificant. In Jesus Christ, God is not only on the side of the poor, he identifies himself with them. This is something Jesus explains to those who ask "'Our Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and we did not minister to you?' To these he answers: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" (Mt 25:44-45)

The other aspect which merits our attention is that the Lord asked Elijah to stand at the entrance of the cave. The verb *to stand* says something important about who God is, about how he wants to relate to us and how he wants us to him. God does not expect us to kneel or to crawl in front of him, to humiliate ourselves in order to gain his attention or favour. It is clear that the all-otherness and majesty of God requires signs of respect.

We must never forget that there is a gap between the Creator and those he created. Yet we do not give glory to God if we deny our own dignity and we do not respect him if we need to humiliate ourselves in his presence. God is not a narcissistic despot who needs us to feel bad for him to be able to feel good.

As we turn our attention to the Gospel passage heard today, we notice quickly that there was great confusion about Jesus' true identity: first he is considered as a ghost, then Peter asked "If it is you, tell me to come to you across the water", and the story concluded on the confession from the men in the boat: "Truly you are the Son of God."

Let us reflect on some of Jesus' words: "Do not be afraid... Come." The fear Jesus is challenging is as much the fear of the storm as the fear of who he is. By these words, Jesus reminds us that there is a childish fear of God which prevents us from growing in true love and firm trust in God. This fear is rooted in a distorted image of God as an angry and merciless divinity, a kind of big brother who keeps us in the dark in order to make us fall so that he can condemn us. This immature fear produces rigidity. According to Pope Francis rigidity is a sin (cf. 2nd Session of the Synod of Bishops, 26.10.2024) because, in its turn, it produces judgemental attitudes, hardness of heart, and it cuts us off from others.

The question about our image of God matters because it is about whom we want to become. If it is true that we discover what it means to be human in relation to the One in whose

image we were created, it is also true that we become what we worship, we inevitably take on the characteristics of whatever we revere.

Who is our God? Here in Northern Ireland, there are some people who claim to be Christians and worship a God who condones racism; in the United States or in Russia, there are some Christians whose God is in favour of death penalty or who is supposed to bless wars; not so long ago an American politician used biblical verses to defend the Trump administration's stance on immigration.

We are neither supposed to be immaturely afraid of God nor to turn him into an idol that we can use for the benefit of our ideologies. Using St Paul's words, "Christ is all" (Col 3:11), and we want to know nothing but him (1 Co 2:2) because "he is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) and, according to Jesus, "no one comes to the Father except through" him (Jn 14:6).

Only Christ can help us to reconnect with the image and likeness of God within us (cf. Gn 1:26). In so doing he awakens within us the desire and also gives us the ability to see the image of God in all men and women. Because "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8), he is relational. So whatever is done, by anyone, which is "rooted and grounded in love" (Eph 3:18), creates relationships and enhances life. It comes from the true God and participates in the building of his kingdom here and now.

The point of God's love is to restore within us his image of love. So the point of our spiritual journey, of all our efforts, is not simply to be received back into the welcoming arms of the loving Father but to become like him. God wants us to make his life ours, his heart ours, his love ours. He wants us to be – like him – characterised and recognised by love.