

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time August 13, 2017 A

The importance of faith during the stormy and difficult moments of life

This weekend's Gospel features the famous story of Jesus walking on water as he comes to the rescue of his disciples whose boat is in danger of capsizing.

In his book *New Sunday and Holy Day Liturgies*, Fr. Flor McCarthy shares with us the following reflections on the Gospel and on the first reading where we find the Prophet Elijah on the run.

Reflection #1. Scripture note

As Matthew relates it, the incident described in today's Gospel is clearly symbolic. *The boat represents the Church; the disciples are beaten by the winds and the waves of persecution.* Jesus is not with them physically; he is in heaven, praying to the Father. However, in the hour of need he comes to them, and with his presence calms their fears and brings them peace.

The incident of Peter sinking and being saved by Jesus is probably a reference to Peter's failure during the Passion, and his restoration after the resurrection. The writer would have known this, and almost certainly had it in mind when telling this story.

In any case, *Peter represents the typical disciple, caught between faith and doubt.* Jesus' rebuke, 'Man of little faith! Why did you doubt?' is directed at us, who often start out courageously only to lose heart when faced with a crisis.

The prophet Elijah adopted a very militant, even bloodthirsty, approach in his battle against idolatry. Now on the run for his life, he takes refuge in a cave where he is taught that God's ways are not man's ways. God's approach is as gentle as a breeze.

My note: Fr. McCarthy seems to imply that today's Gospel is simply symbolic and has no historical basis. I doubt all Scripture scholars would agree with that. Of course I see his point that the real meaning of the story has to do with Jesus coming to the rescue of disciples in times of doubt and fear. In the story, Peter symbolizes both *strong* and *weak* faith. Now back to Fr. McCarthy's reflections.

Reflection #2. Jesus with us in times of persecution and doubt

When taken symbolically, the boat represents the Church; the winds and the waves stand for the persecutions that had been let loose on the early Christians. Jesus is not with them physically; he is in heaven, praying to the Father. However, in their hour of need he makes his presence felt among them, thus calming their fears and bringing them peace. Understood like this, the story had great relevance for us.

Some people think that if you have enough faith, life will be all plain sailing for you. But this is not so. *Faith doesn't shield us from the hard knocks of life and death.*

We see this is the case of the great prophet, Elijah, undoubtedly a man of faith. But because of his opposition to idolatry, Queen Jezebel wanted to kill him. So he fled to the desert and took refuge in a cave. A beaten and broken man, he just wanted to die. However, in the cave he experienced the presence of God. And strengthened by that experience, he was able to go on.

We see the same thing in the lives of the early Christians. They too were people of faith. *Nevertheless, when they encountered persecution, they thought that the Lord had abandoned them, and their faith began to wilt.* However, they discovered that even though the

Lord was not with them physically, he was with them, and could still help them. Hence, their faith revived, and they were able to face their trials and dangers.

The example of Peter is especially enlightening. *The story of Peter sinking and being saved by Jesus is a strange one. Yet it represents something that really did happen to Peter. It is a reference to his failure during the passion, and his restoration after the resurrection.*

Initially he is full of faith as he sets out across the water. We remember his brave words at the last supper: *'Lord, I'm ready to die with you if necessary.'* But then come doubt and cowardice, and he begins to sink, so that Jesus has to rescue him. Peter represents the typical disciple of present time, caught between faith and doubt.

It is comforting for us to see that at times the apostles and early Christians were weak and fearful. In other words, they were just like us. *At the start of an adventure we may be convinced that we are full of faith. However, as we go along, and difficulties arise, we discover that we have very little faith.* It is then that we have to turn to the Lord for help. It's in our weak moments that we experience the strength of God. If we never felt ourselves going under, then we'd never know the rescuing power of God.

Faith doesn't save us from trials and tribulations. What it does is give us strength to face them. The person who has faith has a source of strength and inspiration, especially when trouble strikes. It's not we who keep the faith. It's the faith that keeps us. *'A person with a grain of faith in God never loses hope'* (Gandhi).

The person without faith, on the other hand, has nowhere to turn when trouble strikes. He/she is utterly alone, with neither comfort nor inspiration.

The Gospel story shows us the power of faith. It shows us what Jesus always does for his people, when the wind is contrary and they are in danger of being overwhelmed by the storms of life. To those with faith, Jesus is not a ghost from the past. He is the Son of God, who is present with us, and whose grace upholds us when things are too much for us.

Reflection #3. When we are challenged to "walk on water"

Taken in a literal sense, the story of Peter attempting to walk on water may not be relevant for us. But taken symbolically (which seems to be how Matthew intends it to be taken) it has great relevance for us. 'Walking on water' is a symbol of something that is impossible to unaided human beings. There can be many situations in which we feel weak and powerless.

At some time or other, every disciple of Jesus is faced with very trying circumstances, very difficult decisions, very great sorrows, very powerful temptations. At those times it is as if we are being asked to 'walk on water.' Here are some examples of the kind of things the modern Christian might have to cope with.

John is a young person living away from home. It is Sunday morning. He is in a warm bed and it is cold outside. Should he leave that bed and go to Mass? He knows that he will have to face the laughter of his mates as they take their 'liturgy of the word' straight out of the tabloids. Will John be able to obey the gentle voice of Christ calling him to walk across the water of cynicism to go to church and listen to the Word of God?

Mary is a single girl who has become pregnant. She is heading into the middle of a storm of protest from her parents and gossip from her neighbors as soon as the news breaks. Then she is offered a way out—a quiet abortion. No one will ever know. But then she hears the gentle voice of Christ saying that abortion is wrong. Will she have the courage to listen to that voice?

Eileen is a young mother with three children. Suddenly her husband leaves her for another woman. She feels hurt and betrayed, lonely and angry. Then she hears the voice of Christ inviting her to trust. Will she have the courage to walk on those troubled waters, relying only on the word of Christ?

Gerry is a policeman. A drug dealer offers him a large amount of money if he would turn a blind eye to his activities. It's very tempting. But then he hears the voice of Christ saying, 'Do not participate in corruption.' Will he be able to walk across those foul and ugly waters?

Paul is a commercial traveler. He is away from home. One night he meets a very attractive woman. He hasn't been getting on very well of late with his wife. No one will ever know if he is unfaithful to her. Will he have the strength to walk across the waters of fidelity at the call of Christ, who tells him that adultery is wrong?

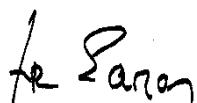
We could multiply the examples, but I think the point has been made. At some time or other, everyone is faced with very trying circumstances. At those times it is as if the Lord is asking us to 'walk on water.' But at the same time he stretches out his hand to uphold us.

At those times we can draw courage from the example of Peter. Peter represents the typical disciple who is caught between faith and doubt. He set out to obey Jesus, but 'as soon as he felt the force of the wind,' that is, persecution, his faith failed him. Jesus' rebuke, 'Man of little faith! Why did you doubt?' is directed at us too. Like Peter, we often start out courageously only to lose heart when the going gets tough.

We have to contend not only with an outer struggle (against 'the elements'), but also with an inner struggle (against ourselves). To some extent, the whole life of a Christian is a kind of 'walking on water,' in so far as it implies walking in faith, which means relying only on the word of Christ. Many times we are asked to step out on his word. But Christ is not a ghostlike figure from the past. He is the Son of God who lives among us.

One day we will have to leave the earthly 'boat' that has carried us through the stormy waters of this world, and set out across the dark waters of death. If at difficult moments during life we have opted for Christ, then at death it will come naturally to us to reach out and take his hand, so that he may haul us onto the shores of eternity.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Le Parron".