

FR. JOHN'S HOMILY

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 9, 2020

These days are challenging and testing. COVID-19 has had a global impact, influencing societies and individuals everywhere, threatening our lives, in sickness and death, making us rethink the ways we live and interact. Shaking up the foundations of how we live, it is causing us to question the reasonableness and security of how we walk through life.

The wind which is COVID-19 is still blowing strong, and we remain in a cautious and careful situation. I am not sure if we have hit the first wave yet; they say there will be a second wave. And now we make preparations to return to school with all the COVID-19 precautions. It makes us fearful, and perhaps doubtful; perhaps it is making us give way to despair, either because of the enduring threat to our physical health, or mental health, or jobs, or education. What are we to do?

If we are feeling this way, this Sunday's Gospel is a good one for us who love the Lord. We can find hope in dealing with this or any other crisis. It will provide a deeper faith and surer hope, and the resilience to help us keep walking through this difficult, uncertain, and shifting situation. We are called to walk on water.

We have heard this Gospel many times, and I am sure that we all relate to the disciples in the boat. Storms are scary and being on water intensifies the storm even more. Think about those disciples, who first experienced that wind, the storm at night. They genuinely did not know it was Jesus who came towards them on the water. Matthew indicates Jesus is on land praying in the hills and then he switches his focus to the boat, which is getting pushed further and further across the lake. Someone is seen walking towards them – Matthew does not say who it is at this point, only identifying the figure as Jesus much later in his account. Yes, it could be a ghost, as they exclaim in fear, because fear makes us see many things that are not real.

But the words spoken by this ghostly figure, reveal it is Jesus who says: Get a hold of yourselves. It is I. Do not be afraid. It seems that Peter has some faith in God that God is greater than all nature, that God can walk on water and has power over this most unruly of forces. Willing to believe in Jesus, at least at first, he now has a decision. Peter dares to believe that it is truly Jesus before him on the stormy water. So in an attempt of faith, brave Peter takes a step toward walking on the water. So, in faith onto the water he goes, into great uncertainty. Isn't this the way it is with God many times in our life when stepping out into uncertainties? God, working through and with his faith, enables Peter to do the impossible. Remember from last week that nothing is impossible with God. This is a great manifestation of God for the purposes of helping people. God has manifested himself upon the water, and is now blessing Peter giving him power to live this faith filled life.

As long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus he could walk on water. As soon as he turns away and senses the presence of the storm, wind and waves, then his faith falters, the sea begins to swallow him and he cries out: "Lord, save me!" He cries to God, and Jesus, who truly is the Lord,

stretches out his hand and answers his prayer. This passage is a very important one in the Gospel of Matthew. It is a major step in the development of the faith of Peter and those with him. It is also given to help our faith.

We are asked, faced with this wind which is this current storm of COVID-19 and the ensuing rough sea, to believe God, working through Jesus is present and can help us through any storm. God is present to each of us – even if normal sacramental encounters are not available to us. Jesus promises to be with us to the end of days. God speaks in the storms of our lives to help us keep walking in faith, love and hope, and so experience calm, no matter what blows in our direction. Then we are asked to be witnesses, pointing out his presence and words to others so that they too may have faith and walk on the water. ‘Have courage! It is I. Do not fear!’

Our faith overcomes our fears. Fear is like this virus that attacks the roots of our belief in God. We do have reason to fear, given the situations and circumstances that face us. Many are even afraid to come to places of worship, to come to Mass.

Yes, our fears are real, but so is our faith. The disciples of Jesus had to face real fear, the boat was being tossed around in the middle of the sea. It was dark, and now they see this figure walking on water. Yes, we know it is Jesus. And Jesus speaks, It is I, the I am, courage! Do not be afraid.

Jesus continues to speak to us, by asking us to not be afraid. He is here; He is with us: whatever storm we might be facing, whenever we feel like we are sinking, He is always there, to reach out and lift us up and place us back into safety and in peace.

I believe in Jesus’ words and in His presence here with us now. Peter’s faith kept him walking on the water. We know the moment he took his eyes off of Jesus is when he was overcome by his fears and sank. Jesus was there to pick him up and put him safely back in the boat. The lesson for Peter and the lesson for us is to keep our eyes on Jesus, not our problems.

Question I ask myself, and invite you to do the same: What would happen if in the storm (I) we did keep our eyes on Jesus? We could walk on water, and we can overcome all things in Him who lives within us.

The storm was Peter’s opportunity and the rest of the disciples to believe and to put their faith in action. We notice it is only Peter who takes a leap of faith here. Where are the others who are still in the boat? Where is their faith? This is an invitation to us all to live our faith in such a way that we can overcome all things in Christ.

Our storm(s) are opportunities to believe in Jesus, for us to take a leap of faith into our uncertainties, and walk towards the Lord. Remember by keeping our eyes on Jesus we can overcome anything. Once faith is in action, it gives witness for others to also believe in the power and strength of God. So as we receive the Lord, He says to us, “Get a hold of yourselves, it is I. Do not be afraid.”