



19th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, August 13, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: 1 Kings 19:9a, 11–13a

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 85:9–14 | **Response:** Psalm 85:8

Second Reading: Romans 9:1–5

Gospel Acclamation: Psalm 130:5

Gospel Reading: Matthew 14:22–33

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Today Jesus continues to reveal aspects of his divinity when he walks on water and commands the winds and the waves. Just like last week he is revealing his divinity in order to strengthen his disciples' faith, and we see in Peter someone who is like us – someone who has faith, who wants to be with Jesus, but also has doubts and sinks and falls at times.

Remember how last week Jesus conversed with Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration on the top of Mount Tabor. I said that Moses represented the Law as he had received the 10 commandments on Mount Sinai; and Elijah represented the Prophets because he was a prophet who encountered God on the top of Mount Horeb. Today we hear about that story of how Elijah encounters God, not in the wind, or an earthquake, or a fire – all previous biblical experiences of God's revelation – but this time, God, the one true God who desires to reveal Godself, is revealed to Elijah, to be in the still small voice.

Our first reading ends abruptly I feel. It in fact finishes in the middle of a verse. Though it's not officially included in the reading today, the verse finishes not just with Elijah standing at the entrance of the cave, but with Elijah listening to God in the quiet voice, and the voice says to him, 'what are you doing here?'

It's a question we might often find ourselves asking: what are we doing? What am I doing? In a way, when we listen to our conscience we hear the same still small voice inside us, and the same question: "What are we doing?"

For Elijah and for many Christians, we might hear God speaking in this, for we believe that God speaks to all of us in our hearts; but for some others they might say this is the voice of our conscience. They are one and the same.

St Paul offers an example of this when he says in our second reading “I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit”

Conscience is the inner voice in a person that moves him or her to do good under any circumstances and to avoid evil by all means. At the same time, it is the ability to distinguish the one from the other. It is in one’s conscience that God speaks to each person. When one listens to one’s conscience, the prudent person can hear God speaking – like Elijah discerning God in the small still voice, a voice found amidst the fury of the storm that brings the wind, the earthquake and the fire.

When we do not listen, or do not take the time to quiet ourselves so that we can hear the still voice inside – we all feel uneasy. We are not confident. We become afraid.

This week our political parties were asked to vote using their consciences. The Speaker of the House, in a historic decision, allowed a secret ballot and members were able to vote according to their conscience. History will judge them for the way they voted – but for those who truly listened to their conscience, they will not be afraid of that judgment.

Whenever we make decisions we should always listen to our conscience.

But there is something else going on in today’s readings, and especially in the Gospel, and it has to do with maintaining a focus, a relationship with Jesus. In this way, I believe, we can truly trust our conscience.

The Gospel scene is again a familiar scene and one that is very apt for Ignatian prayer. We can imagine Jesus walking on the water, and announcing in a calm voice ‘It is I’, which is just another way of saying ‘I am’ – the familiar revelation of God to Israel. And immediately Jesus continues, saying: ‘have no fear’ – do not be afraid – for his disciples thought they were seeing a ghost. Peter tries to go to Jesus and has to shout out ‘Lord, save me’ – and we’re told that Jesus immediately reaches out and rescues Peter.

Jesus reveals his divinity through walking on water and calming the winds and the waves. Peter reveals his little faith – but Jesus accepts him, and saves him, even though he doubts, even though he falls. We're told that Jesus reaches out and catches him.

The lesson for us here is that Jesus is always willing to catch us, always willing to reach out and save us. We will all face stormy situations in our lives – situations where just trying to stay afloat is occupying all our energy and we don't have time to think about how or why things are happening. In these times, the temptation to doubt God or to forget our need for God can grow strong. But it is precisely in these times when we must try and listen for God's voice – the still and calm reassuring presence that God has not forgotten us, that God is reaching out to save us and wants to catch us and help us up again.

I'm sure we can all identify with Peter – wanting to reach Jesus, but when trying to do it by himself, falling. Whenever we take our eyes off of Jesus and look at the turmoil around us and in ourselves, we begin to sink.

I'm reminded of a line in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius that says: first, keep before your eyes, God. We can, with Jesus, do amazing things, walk on water and have a faith that moves mountains – if we keep our eyes on God. But when we lose sight of God, when we become enamoured with 'created things' then we are confronted with our own mortality and weakness, and we become afraid again. We might then be tempted to begin to listen to other voices – of others who are afraid, and like Peter are shouting 'Save me', but we must remember that the voice of the one who is in control, who can command the winds and the waves, is the one who speaks not loudly, but in the silence of our hearts – in our conscience, and in the conscience of those we love.

Sometimes I'm asked to pray for people because they are struggling or are in what classically might be termed 'a time of trial'. I think they want me to say something that will remove the storm from their lives. But times of testing and adversity can show us where we are in our spiritual development and where we need to improve if we are to grow to Christian maturity. In that sense – these times are not to be avoided, but rather seen for what they are – an opportunity to listen to God, the God who is Emmanuel – God-with-us. They are opportunities

for us to reform our life, to inform our conscience and to conform ourselves to Jesus – who is our Lord and Saviour, that is, the one who saves, and desires to save, each and every one of us.

When we experience storms in our lives, let us remember how Jesus stretched out his hands and saved Peter, let us remember how he – as I pray in the Eucharistic prayer – “stretched out his hands so as to break the bonds of death and manifest the resurrection”, actions that should fill our hearts with hope and confidence in God.

What we must learn during the storm is to reflect on our mistakes, to learn, as Jesus wanted Peter to, that distraction and doubt were the reasons for his floundering.

Jesus says to each of us: “Come” Come to me. Sometimes it seems impossible. We set out and suddenly realize how crazy, how difficult, how improbable the task is. We sometimes doubt our call. We ask ourselves, not ‘what are we doing’ but ‘how can I do this’ or ‘why are you even trying’. We only fail when we try to live our lives and do things without God. We must always remember that we cannot do anything without God.

We can do the impossible, if only we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and our ears open for his encouragement, which might not come in a loud flash, but often-times will come in the small still voice of a friend, a smile or the simple witness of solidarity reminding us that we are not alone.

When we listen for God, and listen to God, we will recognize the voice of God, we will listen to our conscience, and we will not be afraid. We will know exactly what we are doing, for we will be doing what the Psalmist exhorted us to do in today’s Psalm, ‘Let [us] hear what God the LORD will speak.’

Amen.

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