

# NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

## WALKING ON THE WATER: August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020: **Matthew 14:22-33**

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.

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?

It's true therefore, that if we take the Gospel of this weekend **Matthew 14:22-33** literally the story has little or no relevance for us. But it seems that Matthew meant to be 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 has 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 in the case of the great prophet, Elijah (First Reading). Elijah was 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 the 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. Amen**

**Like Peter we too have often set out confidently across the waters of life.** However, as soon as the winds of trouble rise against us, and the waves of adversity begin to buffet us, we lose our nerve and begin to sink. Lord, when our faith falters, as it often does, may we hear your gentle voice saying to us, 'Courage! Do not be afraid.' In that moment, Lord, may your divine power uphold us, calm our fears, steady our nerves, and enable us to steer our little boat to a place of safety and peace, beyond the wind and the waves