

19th Sunday, Year A

Mt 14: 22-33

In order to understand today's gospel, we really need to read it in conjunction with what comes just before it in Matthew: the miracle of the loaves and the fishes – when Jesus fed the five thousand from two loaves and a few fish.

The two miracles together – the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on the water – unmistakably connect Jesus to the greatest even in the history of the Jewish nation: the Exodus out of Egypt, when God fed them in the desert with manna from heaven, and led them dry-shod through the sea to safety on the other side.

Thus the *theological* meaning of today's Gospel is that Jesus is the New Moses, leading his people into a new Promised Land – but he is greater than Moses, who led his people through the sea dry-shod. Jesus walks over the water – and he calls on Peter to walk on the water too.

This is the revelation of who Jesus really is: not just a great leader and prophet, like Moses, but truly God himself come among us. He feeds us with bread from heaven – the Eucharist – and through the waters of Baptism – leads us into the new Promised Land which is his community, the community we call the Church.

We notice that Peter, too, has his part. When he hears the Lord's voice, he responds, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you across the water." This is his response in Faith to the Lord's call. Without Faith, Baptism would just be a physical washing. Peter shows his faith, and, though it falters, Jesus saves him.

As well as this rather theoretical *theological* meaning, however, we may also find more personal encouragement in this gospel.

We all experience stormy moments in our lives, when the waves seem almost overwhelming. Perhaps some people are feeling like that right now, with our city and indeed our world in the grip of this epidemic. We may be assailed by doubts, overcome with anxiety. Jesus sent the apostles out on the sea of Galilee in this boat, but the apostles are wondering: did he know what he was doing?

Cardinal Newman – Saint John Henry Newman – was a man whose life seemed to be beset with such storms. Born into the Anglican Church, he struggled to show that it was really a branch of the Catholic Church, and that the Thirty-Nine Articles of that Church were not directed against Catholicism but against "against popular errors and exaggerations."

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Eventually the hostility of his fellow Anglicans as well as his own reading and reflection, particularly on St Augustine, led him to give up that view, and to formally leave the Anglicans and join the Catholic Church. But if he thought that the Catholic Church would welcome him with open arms, he was mistaken. Many regarded this ex-Anglican with suspicion, and although he was ordained a Catholic priest, and in his old age made a Cardinal – a sign of acceptance at last – he endured many years of hostility and suspicion from both Anglicans and Catholics.

None of this caused him to doubt God's goodness and providence. God had his purpose. There were many others, for example, who found the courage to follow him in embracing the catholic Faith. Towards the end of his life, Newman wrote this prayer:

God has created me to do Him some definite service.
He has committed some work to me, which He has not committed to another.
I have my mission.
I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.
I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.
He has not created me for naught.
I shall do good; I shall do His work.
I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place,
while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments.
Therefore, I will trust Him.
Whatever I am; I can never be thrown away.
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him;
in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him.
If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him.
He does nothing in vain.
He knows what He is about.
He may take away my friends.
He may throw me among strangers.
He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me.
Still, He knows what He is about.

It is, I think, a great prayer to make our own in these troubled times.

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9 August, 2020*